

EPA plans project to remove insulation

Public health emergency to give EPA go-ahead

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Western News Reporter

The Environmental Protection Agency is drawing up plans for a multimillion-dollar project to begin removing asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation from hundreds of area homes and businesses starting next summer.

EPA on-scene coordinator Paul Peronard is working on an action memo outlining the particulars of the project and expects to submit the plan to agency headquarters next week. The memo will allow the EPA to declare a public health emergency in Libby, giving the agency the authority to remove the insulation.

Peronard's work relies heavily on a recently completed risk assessment authored by EPA toxicologist Chris Weis that details the risks posed by exposure to the contaminated insulation.

Weis's memo uses information collected by the EPA and the Agency for

Toxic Substances and Disease Registry over the past two years. Weis and Peronard acknowledge that the risk estimates may be low, because the assessment is based on data for chrysotile asbestos of the type used in commercial products such as pipe wrappings and brake linings. The amphibole asbestos found in the vermiculite ore mined near Libby is considered more hazardous but little data exists on which to base an assessment.

"It's not in our normal realm of experience," Peronard said.

The traditional risk assessment ignores fibers below a certain size, but small amphibole fibers may be more dangerous than small chrysotile fibers, Peronard said.

The known risks presented by exposure to the fibers are enough to warrant action, Peronard said, especially when the sheer number of area residents affected is considered.

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"We're talking about a huge segment of this population that has this exposure," he said.

More than half the homes and many businesses in the Libby area contain vermiculite insulation that contains varying amounts of asbestos. Peronard is planning for the removal of insulation from up to 800 homes at an estimated cost of \$20,000 per home. That includes overhead costs, sam-

pling expenses, the replacement of carpet and a thorough cleaning of each home in addition to the actual removal of insulation, he said.

The project will have implications nationwide, Peronard said.

"We don't mean that because we do it in Libby we'll have to do it everywhere else, but it certainly raises that question," he said.